BY MADELEINE WEBSTER AND DANIEL THATCHER

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released the landmark report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. It was the first report to scrutinize the practice of lowering academic expectations to maintain the appearance of high student achievement levels.

The report predicted that lowering standards would result in the decline of the U.S. education system. In the decades since, U.S. students’ performance on international comparisons, such as PISA and TIMMS, and the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) has stagnated. One policy recommendation *A Nation at Risk* made to address stagnant achievement levels included holding all U.S. students accountable to consistent, rigorous standards.

Toward this end, albeit decades later, governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states, two territories and the District of Columbia formally launched the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSS Initiative) in June 2009 through their respective organizations (the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers). The CCSS initiative received additional support at the time from a diverse cadre of political, education and business leaders.
The objective of the CCSS Initiative was to identify and develop a common set of core knowledge and skills mastery in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics every American high school graduate would need to enter college or a career prepared to succeed. One year later, the CCSS Initiative released the Common Core State Standards (the CCSS) for ELA and mathematics for state adoption.

Who Developed the Common Core State Standards?

The CCSS Initiative developed the standards, drawing upon input from educators and educator groups, higher education stakeholders, content experts, parents and the public. Throughout the development process, the CCSS Initiative also tapped the expertise of an advisory board that included Achieve Inc., ACT, the College Board, the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) and State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO). In September 2009, the CCSS Initiative released a draft proposal of the CCSS for an initial round of public comment that was incorporated into later drafts. On March 10, 2010, the CCSS Initiative posted an updated draft online to solicit further comments and suggestions from the public. The CCSS Initiative reported that it received more than 10,000 public comments during this time. The final draft of the standards was released in June 2010, Figure 1 shows the CCSS development timeline.

By late 2011, 45 states, the District of Columbia and two territories had formally adopted the CCSS. In most states, the state legislature delegates authority to adopt statewide academic or content standards to its state board of education. In at least nine states, however, state legislatures enjoy the right to review or approve of state standards adopted by the state board. Since adopting the CCSS, some states have taken steps to revoke, rebrand or legislate either the standards adoption process or the standards themselves (Figure 2).
Did the Federal Government Require States to Adopt the Common Core State Standards?

States individually and independently adopted the CCSS through their own legal processes between 2010 and 2012. Because states chose to adopt the standards under their authority to do so, adoption is considered voluntary.

States were encouraged to “adopt common standards” in the 2010 Race to the Top grant program, although some states received funding without adopting the CCSS.8 Announced in July 2009 as a part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Race to the Top made $4.35 billion in grants available to applying states to advance certain education policy reforms (see box for a breakdown of the specifics of the application).

What Are Academic Standards and How Are the Common Core State Standards Different?

Not to be confused with curriculum, academic standards are public statements that broadly describe “what teachers are supposed to teach and students are expected to learn” in the core subject areas, accord-

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Race to the Top Selection Criteria (500 points total)

- Great Teachers and Leaders: 138 points
- State Success Factors: 125 points
- Standards and Assessments: 70 points
  - Total of 70 points available under Standards and Assessment Criteria:
    - 40 points for “developing and adopting common standards”
    - 20 for “participating in a consortium developing high-quality standards”
    - 20 points for “adopting standards”
    - 10 points for “developing and implementing common, high quality assessments”
    - 20 points for “supporting the transition to enhanced standards and high-quality assessments”
- General Selection Criteria: 55 points
- Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools: 50 points
- Data Systems to Support Instruction: 47 points
The CCSS, however, focus academic standards around a common goal. The CCSS Initiative designed the standards to “ensure that students graduating from high school are prepared to take credit-bearing introductory courses in two- or four-year college programs or enter the workforce.”

The CCSS not only address different topics at different grade levels than most previously adopted state standards, but also place more emphasis on demonstrating understanding and analysis. (See box for an example comparison of the CCSS and other standards.) Where the previous set of standards calls simply for a student to demonstrate a basic skill such as graphing a line, the CCSS require that students understand the broad mathematical concepts behind the task.

Initially, the CCSS included only 85 percent of states’ total mathematics and ELA standards in all grades; however, as states move forward with implementation, many are beginning to modify or alter the 85 percent and add additional standards. In order to allow flexibility in high school course design, CCSS employs two-year bands for grades nine to 12 (i.e., one set of standards covers grades nine and 10 and another set covers grades 11 and 12).

How Do the Common Core State Standards Affect Statewide Assessment Systems?

States implementing the Common Core State Standards need new assessments to measure student progress against the new standards. In 2010, in recognition of this need, the U.S. Department of Education awarded two assessment consortia $330 million in Race to the Top competitive grants to develop assessments aligned to the CCSS; $170 million to Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC); and $160 million to SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). Because states oversee development of the assessments vis-à-vis the consortia collaboratively, the assessments are referred to as state-developed and the consortia are referred to as state-led.

CCSS-aligned assessments need to be very different from previous state assessments. To be aligned to the CCSS, PARCC and SBAC need to test students’ ability

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**SBAC Sample Item**

Oliver was a dog that lived in a small town near a lake. He loved to play outside. Oliver liked to play fetch, but his favorite thing to do was to chase leaves. He loved chasing leaves so much that his favorite time of year was fall when the leaves fell off the trees. One beautiful fall day, Oliver and his owner, Jeff, went for a walk around the lake. They were enjoying the sunshine and the lake when suddenly a dragonfly flew past. For a moment, Oliver forgot where he and Jeff were and what they were doing. All of a sudden there was a big splash.

Write an ending for the story by adding details to tell what happens next.

http://sampleitems.smarterbalanced.org/itempreview/sbac/ELA.htm

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**PARCC High School Sample Item**

Use what you have learned from “Daedalus and Icarus” by Ovid and “To a Friend Who’s Work has Come to Triumph” by Anne Sexton to write an essay that provides an analysis of how Sexton transforms “Daedalus and Icarus.” Develop your claim(s) of how Sexton transforms “Daedalus and Icarus” with evidence from both texts. As a starting point, you may want to consider what is emphasized, absent or different in the two texts, but feel free to develop your own focus for analysis.

http://epat-parcc.testnav.com/client/index.html#getitem/8209
to demonstrate understanding and analysis. Assessment experts, or psychometricians, consider demonstrating understanding and analysis a higher-level skill that is difficult to capture accurately in an assessment. Currently, most state assessment questions tap higher-level skills less than 2 percent of the time in mathematics, and only 21 percent of the time in ELA. A recent analysis of SBAC, however, found that 68 percent of the assessment questions in ELA and 70 percent in mathematics demand higher-level thinking.

CCSS-aligned assessments test for high-level skills by using less multiple-choice test questions and more “performance tasks” (see box for examples) or test questions that ask students to synthesize responses using multiple sources of information.

Another important shift SBAC and PARCC make in statewide assessment systems is that they are administered online, allowing educators and schools to collect and analyze results and adjust instruction more quickly. PARCC and SBAC states plan to administer fully operational end-of-year summative assessments in the spring of 2015; results of these assessments will be available at the beginning of the following school year. Beginning in the 2015-2016 school year, states will have the option of administering formative interim or mid-year assessments to track students’ progress toward meeting the CCSS throughout the school year.

Due to concerns about cost and oversight, some states have changed their membership within their consortium, switched consortium, or dropped out and released requests-for-proposals from other assessment vendors. State positions on assessments remain in flux. Figure 3 depicts the state-by-state breakdown of assessment systems in Summer 2011 and Summer 2014. Alternative assessment vendors include ACT Aspire, AIR and Pearson, among others. States that have chosen alternative vendors will proceed on their own timelines.

U.S. Department of Education, through the Office of Special Education Programs, awarded smaller Race to the Top grants to three separate state-led consortia to develop alternative assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities and for English language learners.

These consortia are:
- Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM): http://dynamiclearningmaps.org/,
- National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC): http://www.ncscpartners.org/, and

How Do the Common Core State Standards Affect Curriculum and Instruction?

Standards will have little effect unless educators have the tools they need to bring them alive in the classroom. Educators need access to instructional materials and tools that align to the CCSS. Yet, there is little conclusive research on the best methodology local education agencies schools and educators should use for selecting strong, CCSS-aligned curriculum. Nonetheless, accomplishing this shift is essential.

States retain sole authority over which CCSS-aligned curriculum to adopt; neither the CCSS Initiative nor the consortia ask states to yield that authority. Currently, most states allow local boards of education to choose their curriculum, which they do from a variety of both in- and out-of-state providers and vendors. States vary in terms of how they regulate whether districts and schools adopt quality curriculum. Some state boards of education allow districts to choose from a menu of approved curriculum providers, while most other states leave these decisions to individual districts and, in some cases, individual schools or
educators.

CCSS-implementing states are taking steps to select and use CCSS-aligned curriculum and instructional materials. A number of vendors currently offer a variety of CCSS-aligned instructional materials; however, states are advised to be wary of vendors claiming to be CCSS “aligned” or “compliant.” Researchers have found that almost 70 percent of math textbooks claiming to be aligned to the CCSS are not.21 Some states have sought the expertise of third-party curriculum vendors such as Achieve the Core.22 Others have redirected funds to develop curricular modules such as EngageNY. According to the 2014 Fordham Institute report Common Core in the Districts: An Early Look at the Implementers, others still are working “to either adapt existing curricula or create new ones,” in the vacuum of available options and concerns about “spending limited dollars on materials that were not truly aligned to the Common Core.”23

Other states passed legislation to ensure that well-aligned instructional materials are made available to local boards. For example, in the 2011-2012 session, the Washington Legislature passed House Bill 2337, appropriating funds for the development of an online repository of open license courseware aligned to the CCSS that allows educators to use, distribute and create additional instructional materials based on the resources in the repository.24

How Do the Common Core State Standards Affect Educators?

Teacher expertise accounts for 40 percent of student learning. This means successful implementation of the standards hinges on educator mastery and delivery of CCSS-aligned curriculum.25 Ensuring that educators are well-prepared to teach the CCSS is difficult, because the current teaching pedagogy, or the science or profession of teaching, is very different from the teaching pedagogy necessary for the CCSS.26 According to a 2012 Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) study, most educator pedagogy relies on rote memorization and simple tasks, whereas the CCSS necessitate reliance on fostering critical thinking.27 To achieve this shift in instructional practice, educators need effective professional development. Research confirms, however, that current professional development systems, often limited to a few “sit and get” hours a year, are normally ineffective.28

States are working to overcome these two challenges by changing the structure of professional development and choosing resources that are well-aligned to the CCSS. According to the Fordham report, early implementing states are focusing on instructional coaching—the practice of having highly effective educators coaching other educators in CCSS-aligned pedagogy—and joint planning, or built-in time for educators to plan lessons together and reflect on effectiveness.29 To select materials, some states are looking to organizations such as LearningForward, which has compiled a number of resources on state options for implementing CCSS-aligned professional development, in an initiative called Transforming Professional Learning to Prepare College- and Career-Ready Students; Implementing the Common Core.30

Many educators expressed concern about how new educator evaluations are linked to CCSS-aligned assessment data. States may need to rethink current professional development programs to help educators successfully deliver the CCSS in the classroom. States are also addressing educators’ concerns by altering the relationship between assessment data and evaluations, or by slowing down use of the data in evaluations.31

How Do the Common Core State Standards Affect the K-12 and Higher Education Relationship?

A primary objective of the CCSS is to improve student readiness for college and to reduce the need for remediation. States are working to improve readiness in several ways. First, states are deepening the coordination between higher education and K-12 systems by bringing the two together to develop common definitions of college- and career-readiness. As of July 2014, 36 states had adopted a formal college- and career-readiness definition to guide future policymaking.32

Second, states are streamlining the high school-to-college transition by employing college admissions assessments that are CCSS-aligned. ACT has announced plans to tailor its high school assessment to the CCSS, placing greater emphasis on statistics and probability, including more comprehension-based questions that demand the use of multiple sources of information, and by altering the scoring process to include a “progress toward college-readiness” division in each subject area.33 The SAT is also aligning itself with the CCSS by removing its trademark vocabulary and reasoning test sections and instead focusing on content mastery.34 Eighteen states now set passing scores on a CCSS-aligned assessment as a minimum college admissions requirement.35 States are also designing policy to award merit-based scholarships to students who pass CCSS-aligned assessments.

Third, states are aligning educator preparation programs embedded in state higher education systems to prepare educators to teach the CCSS. A Center on Education Policy survey reports that, of the 40 responding states, 35 are aligning educator preparation to the CCSS by providing briefings on the CCSS to school of education faculty at colleges and universities.36
How Much Does Implementation Cost?

A number of factors determine the cost of implementing CCSS in the states. These factors depend greatly on each state’s unique position. Some states are better prepared for the technology needs of the new assessments, while others will need to augment their capacity to administer online, computer-based assessments. Some states will need to invest more in professional development, while others will need to focus on updating curriculum and instructional materials with those that align with CCSS.

These costs can be broken down into one-time costs, specific to the transition to CCSS, versus recurring costs, specific to the year-after-year maintenance, upkeep and investment of assessments, curriculum and professional development. One-time costs need not all occur in one fiscal year, but can be spread out over a four- to five-year implementation period. By the end of the 2014-15 school year, most states will have already borne the majority of one-time costs needed to transition to the CCSS. States can fold many of the recurring costs into their existing investments in technological infrastructure, CCSS-aligned assessments and instructional materials. Recurring costs associated with assessments depend on the potential for economies of scale created by the state-led, collaborative structure of the assessment consortia. Specifically, both consortia have pledged to maintain open digital libraries of formative assessments; tools and resources for training educators and providing professional development; model curriculum frameworks, tutorials and practice tests for students and educators; training modules for scoring; and other tools to support educator collaboration (see box).

For specific legislative and non-legislative cost estimates, visit www.ncsl.org.

Which States Have Chosen to Implement Different Standards?

As of October 2014, five states—Indiana, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma and South Carolina—have passed legislation to implement different standards.

Indiana passed House Bill 1427 in 2013, directing the Indiana State Board of Education to take no further action to implement the CCSS until it conducted a comprehensive evaluation; it further required the board to adopt new college- and career-readiness standards by July 1, 2014. In 2014, Indiana passed Senate Bill 91, which set criteria for the new standards, as well as a timeline for adoption of new standards-aligned assessments.

Missouri passed House Bill 1427 in 2013, directing the Indiana State Board of Education to take no further action to implement the CCSS until it conducted a comprehensive evaluation; it further required the board to adopt new college- and career-readiness standards by July 1, 2014. In 2014, Indiana passed Senate Bill 91, which set criteria for the new standards, as well as a timeline for adoption of new standards-aligned assessments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States will need to invest in…</th>
<th>One-time costs</th>
<th>Recurring costs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technological Infrastructure</td>
<td>States with outdated computer systems or states lacking the necessary internet infrastructure for online assessments need to update their systems</td>
<td>States need to maintain school network systems; maintenance costs can be folded into states’ existing recurring investments in technological infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCSS-Aligned Assessments</td>
<td>States need to procure new CCSS-aligned assessments</td>
<td>States need to annually administer, maintain and update CCSS-aligned assessments; upkeep costs can be folded into existing recurring investments in assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCSS-Aligned Curriculum</td>
<td>States and LEAs? need to procure CCSS-aligned curriculum and instructional materials</td>
<td>States already annually appropriate funds for curriculum and instructional materials, and will need to focus those resources CCSS-aligned options in an ongoing manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCSS-Aligned Professional Development</td>
<td>States need to prepare educators and school leaders to effectively deliver CCSS-aligned instruction to students</td>
<td>States need to provide ongoing, high-quality professional development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The work groups are to convene by October 2015, to adopt and implement the new standards in the 2016-2017 school year, and to align to state assessments within three years of adoption.

North Carolina passed Senate Bill 812 in July 2014, directing the board of education to conduct a comprehensive review of standards in ELA and mathematics in consultation with the Academic Standards Review Commission, which was established in the bill. The board will recommend changes and modifications to the CCSS and select and implement assessments that it deems appropriate to assess student achievement on the CCSS.

Oklahoma passed House Bill 3399 in May 2014, directing the Oklahoma State Board of Education to adopt new standards “designed to prepare all students for active citizenship, employment and/or successful completion of postsecondary education without the need for remedial coursework at the postsecondary level” by August 2016.

South Carolina passed House Bill 3893 in May 2014, directing the South Carolina State Board of Education to adopt new college- and career-readiness standards by the 2015-2016 school year, and altering future standards adoption processes.

Each state is operating on its own unique timeline and its own unique cost estimates. For example, the Indiana Legislative Services Agency estimated that developing and implementing a new assessment may cost up to $26 million, and the aligned professional development will cost between $32 million and $125 million over the next five years. States that are implementing different college- and career-readiness standards will need to work with the U.S. Department of Education to determine the impact on each state’s unique ESEA waiver.

How Are States Moving Forward With Implementation Of the Common Core State Standards?

Since 2011, state legislatures have enacted more than 250 bills to implement the CCSS by making appropriations and aligning state education systems to their new standards. Most implementing states plan to achieve full implementation by the 2014-2015 school year. Figure 4 provides a general implementation timeline.

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Figure 4. Title
The Center for Education Policy surveys state superintendents each year to learn more about states’ strategies, policies and challenges in implementing the CCSS. The box above captures some of the key findings from 40 responding states.

### What Are the Potential Benefits and Drawbacks of Implementing the Common Core State Standards?

A March 2010 NCSL LegisBrief reported that standards proponents argued the standards would further states’ educational goals and objectives in the following ways:

- **Articulate to parents, educators and the general public expectations for students, regardless of where the student lives.**
  - According to a 2014 CEP report, the majority of districts in CCSS-adopting states have reached out to stakeholders to explain how the CCSS are more rigorous and why student performance on CCSS-aligned assessments may be lower than on previous assessments.

- **Align textbooks, digital media and curricula to international standards.**
  - CEP reports that 75 percent of districts in implementing states are collaborating with other partners to create CCSS-aligned curricula.

- **Base professional development for educators on identified needs and best practices.**

- **Develop and implement an assessment system to measure student performance against the CCSS.**

- **Evaluate policy changes needed to help students and educators meet the standards.**

Other assets offered by the proponents of the Standards include:

- **Rigor.** According to the October 2014 CEP report, 90 percent of district leaders in adopting states agree that the CCSS are more rigorous than previous ELA and math standards and will lead to improved skills.

- **State-Driven.** States—not the federal government—voluntarily developed and adopted the standards.

- **Cross-State Comparability.** The CEP reports that higher proportions of districts are collaborating with other districts, nonprofits, SEAs and institutions of higher education from other states as they complete CCSS implementation activities.

- **Portability.** Because of the standards’ near ubiquity across the nation, students and parents will have common expectations in the classroom, regardless of location or in the event of a move.

Opponents of the standards have suggested that:

- **Adoption of national standards is only one step removed from a federally mandated curriculum.**

- **Implementation of the standards may have unforeseen or unintended policy consequences.**

- **States stand to endure a net loss of time, money and effort in their adoption of the standards.**

- **Standards alone will not improve student achievement.**

- **Standards must be accompanied by rigorous curricula and tests that provide educators useful information on each individual student’s growth toward meeting standards.**

The MOU signed between states and consortia include the following drawbacks for states:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>State Progress in Implementing the CCSS</th>
<th>State Challenges in Implementing the CCSS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCSS-aligned curriculum is being taught in at least 30 states</td>
<td>Cuts or freezes in general K-12 funding is negatively affecting implementation in at least 20 states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least 37 states have begun to employ CCSS-aligned professional development</td>
<td>At least 32 states are struggling to develop evaluation systems to hold educators accountable to the CCSS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 PARCC states and 21 SBAC states participated in the 2014 field testing of the new assessments and are currently reviewing feedback</td>
<td>At least 26 states report that identifying and/or developing the curriculum materials for the CCSS is a challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least 34 states are conducting CCSS briefings for faculty in postsecondary schools of education</td>
<td>Only nine states report having adequate staffing levels, expertise and fiscal resources to fully support implementation of the CCSS</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
- Loss of Autonomy over Core Content Area Assessments. All MOUs require that each state must employ the consortia’s assessments for federal accountability purposes under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act/No Child Left Behind by the 2014-2015 school year.
- Costly Implementation. Both consortia will require computer-based assessments, so states may face an up-front cost to purchase or upgrade the needed technological infrastructure to deliver the assessments.

**Conclusion**

It is incumbent upon states to ensure that implementation of the standards remains a state-driven and state-focused effort, and that standards-aligned curriculum development remains within the prerogative of state and local education agencies and school boards.

During the implementation process, NCSL remains committed to assisting state legislatures with these or any other policy concerns that may arise.

**Endnotes**

6. A summary of public comment can be found at www.corestandards.org/assets/k-12-feedback-summary.pdf and www.corestandards.org/assets/CorePublicFeedback.pdf.
8. Minnesota, for example, which adopted only the ELA CCSS standards, was still awarded Race to the Top funds in 2010. Minnesota’s Race to the Top application score sheet, which made “adoption of common standards” only 40 points of the available 500 application points, can be accessed at www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/index.html.
14. For more information on PARCC, visit parcconline.org.
15. For more information about SBAC, visit www.smarterbalanced.org/.


29. Katie Cristol and Brinton S. Ramsey, Common Core in the Districts.


31. Florida passed Senate Bill 1642 in 2014, which delays counting test results of English-learner students for accountability purposes until those students have had at least two years of instruction.


34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.


37. In Wisconsin, for instance, school districts replace curricula every five to seven years. Because the state had five years within which to transition fully to CCSS, school districts updated their curricula over the normal five to seven year replacement cycle. Wisconsin State Legislature, 2013 Act 20 Fiscal Estimate of Implementation or Rejection of Common Core Standards (Madison, Wis.: Legislative Fiscal Bureau Report to Joint Committee on Finance, August 2013), 5.


39. For NCSL analysis of these bills and links to bill web pages and bill text, visit http://www.ccrslegislation.info/.


44 Ibid.


46 Nancy Kober, and Diane Stark Rentner, Common Core State Standards in 2014; Districts’ Perceptions, Progress and Challenges. As evidence of the federal government’s creep toward a national curriculum, opponents cite three moves by the department:

1) As a condition of winning Race to the Top funding, states needed to demonstrate to the department a commitment to adopt and implement college- and career-readiness standards;

2) In applications for waivers from the No Child Left Behind law, the department heavily weighted adoption of college- and career-readiness standards in considering whether to grant a waiver; and

3) The department is funding close to 99 percent of PARCC and SBAC to develop standards-aligned assessments.

48 For example, a student beginning the 12th grade in 2014-2015, the target date for full implementation, may be a year behind in the new mathematics standards because his or her 11th grade mathematics courses were not yet aligned to the standards. Many students may find themselves in a similar limbo. States may need to enact policies that support students caught in a similar limbo.

49 Smarter Balance Assessment Consortium, Frequently Asked Questions (Location of publication unknown: SBAC, 2012); www.smarterbalanced.org/resources-events/faq/. MOUs allow states to supplement the standards with their state-specific standards so long as those standards comprise no more than 15 percent of both standards combined. Assessments will be individualized to account for each state’s supplemental standards.